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Strengthening capacity in HIV operations research: Reflections on a Project SOAR workshop in Johannesburg, South Africa

Project SOAR

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Strengthening Capacity in HIV Operations Research

Reflections on a Project SOAR Workshop in Johannesburg, South Africa, 20–23 February 2017

Capacity strengthening (CS) to support rigorous scientific research is a globally recognized need and central to Project SOAR. Over a four-day period, SOAR conducted a CS workshop to strengthen individual and institutional capacity in HIV operations research, with a particular emphasis on the research utilization (RU) process. This brief summarizes the CS activities conducted, insights from the workshop's organization, and participants' views of the workshop.

Overview of Participants & Activities

Investigators from Project SOAR research studies in 12 countries (Cameroon, Senegal, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Lesotho, South Africa, Swaziland, Malawi, Namibia, and Zambia) participated in the workshop. Each investigator was joined by a study stakeholder from a governmental or nongovernmental institution in the SOAR study country who is intrinsic to the study's RU goals.

Engaging both SOAR researchers and country-level decision-makers was key to sparking unique discussion, greater understanding, and closer collaboration.

The workshop was conducted over four days in Johannesburg, South Africa. Content for the workshop was based on participant responses to a needs assessment. Figure 1 highlights the objectives of each day of the workshop and the corresponding outputs produced by participants. Significant time was allotted for small groups to work together with facilitators to produce and present designated "outputs." This output model kept participants engaged during and after the workshop. **Purposeful groupings of participants by research area and region helped foster networking between individuals working on similar themes or in similar regions.**

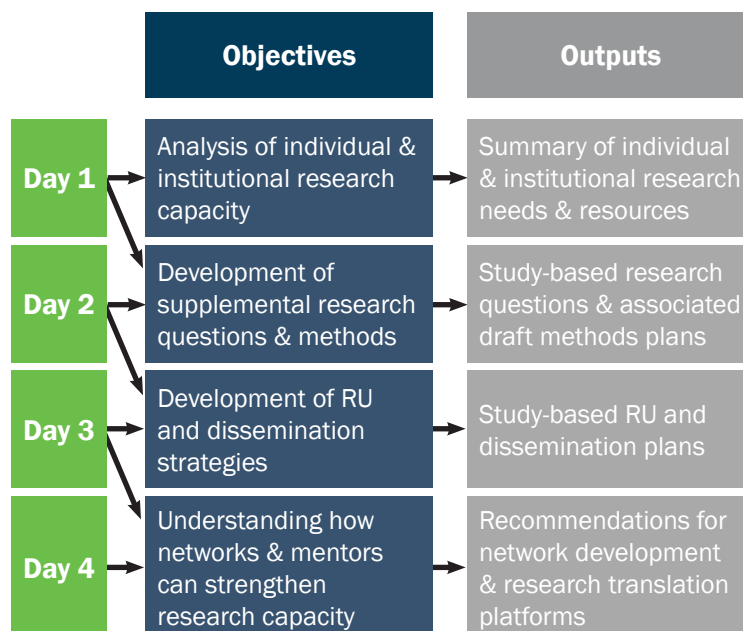


Figure 1 Map of daily content: objectives and output

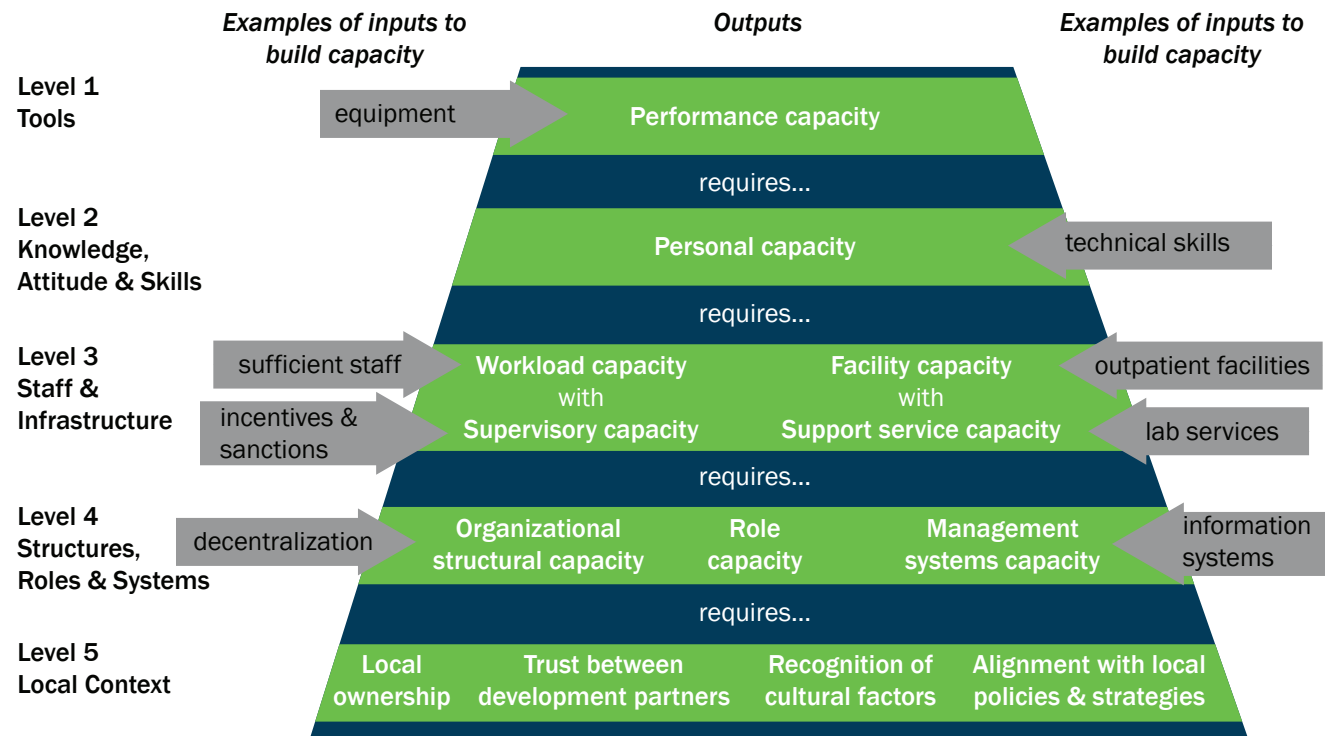
Day One: Capacity Building and Priorities

On the first day, facilitators presented the Capacity Strengthening Pyramid (Figure 2) and explained how it can be used as a model for systematic, strategic capacity enhancement at the project, program, and institutional levels. Participants were asked to identify personal and institutional needs at each of the pyramid levels and present a summary of their needs.

Day Two: Implementation Science & Developing Research Questions

Facilitators presented frameworks for implementation science and operations research. Participants discussed the challenge of attribution and changing views of attribution over time. Working in small groups, participants developed supplemental research questions to their SOAR studies that could be answered relatively easily, providing a richer understanding of the issue addressed by the original study. Additionally, participants were introduced to criteria for pitching their research to stakeholders whom they would like to engage in the RU process.

Figure 2 Capacity Strengthening Pyramid



Adapted from Potter, C. and R. Brough. 2004. "Systemic capacity building: A hierarchy of needs," *Health Policy and Planning* 19(5): 336–345 and Manabe, Y. et al. 2011. "Developing independent investigators for clinical research relevant for Africa," *Health Research Policy and Systems* 9(44).

Day Three: Disseminating Findings and Fostering RU

Participants discussed the varied communication needs of different audiences; criteria for choosing which findings to highlight; and how to identify a key finding, communicate its implications, and provide recommendations. Participants learned about SOAR support on RU and dissemination. Participants also shared insights and challenges to publishing project results and using data effectively to communicate with stakeholders and broader audiences.

Day Four: Building Networks

Facilitators reflected on the impact of two prominent African leadership networks and shared insights into how to effectively build and utilize networks. Leaders and participants were eager to develop a mechanism through which mentorship and workshops could continue to grow.

Participants' Views of the Workshop

Participants completed an evaluation after returning home, and almost all respondents strongly agreed

that the workshop content was relevant to their jobs. The majority felt differently about both their personal and institutional CS needs after the workshop. The majority of respondents strongly agreed they now felt more comfortable engaging with someone from a different profession. When asked what skills were strengthened during the workshop, common responses included identifying research questions, resource mobilization, networking, and pitching their research ideas to potential stakeholders. One participant had "greater knowledge of existing local and regional structures for disseminating and implementing research findings."

Next Steps

Project SOAR has invited research teams to submit proposals for small grants to a) answer additional research questions from their studies, b) conduct further RU activities, or c) strengthen a knowledge translation platform. In mid-2018 SOAR will hold a follow-up workshop with the grantees and mentors to foster successful implementation of their funded projects.